

## **Committee on Resources, Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, & Public Lands**

[parks](#) - - Rep. Joel Hefley, Chairman

U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6207 - - (202) 226-7736

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### **Witness Statement**

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**STATEMENT OF ANNE OLSON, PRESIDENT, BUFFALO BAYOU PARTNERSHIP (HOUSTON, TEXAS), BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES, SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, RECREATION AND PUBLIC LANDS, CONCERNING H.R.1776, AUTHORIZING THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR TO STUDY THE SUITABILITY AND FEASIBILITY OF ESTABLISHING THE BUFFALO BAYOU NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA IN HOUSTON, TEXAS**

**July 17, 2001**

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, I sincerely thank you for this opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation and Public Lands in support of House Bill 1776 to authorize the Secretary of the Interior to study the suitability and feasibility of establishing the Buffalo Bayou National Heritage Area in Houston, Texas.

My name is Anne Olson and I am President of the Buffalo Bayou Partnership. The group oversees beautification and redevelopment efforts along Buffalo Bayou, Houston's historic waterway. I have been president of this non-profit organization for the past six years.

My testimony will provide you with an overview of the proposed Buffalo Bayou National Heritage Area and its national significance as a natural, cultural, recreational and historic resource. A statement of historical significance will be provided by Mr. Steven Fox, lecturer in the history of architecture at Rice University and the University of Houston, who joins me here today.

My testimony includes information about the organizational structure of the Buffalo Bayou Partnership, its funding sources, its numerous partnerships, and its capacity to administer the proposed National Heritage Area.

As you know, partnerships are key to the success of the National Heritage Area Program. I am here to tell you about the significant public-private efforts that are the foundation of our Buffalo Bayou redevelopment program. These partnerships will be strong support for the Buffalo Bayou National Heritage Area. New partnerships will be formed, as well.

Chances are when you think of Houston, America's fourth largest city, you think of a modern downtown skyline, congested freeways and a cowboy or two. But there is another Houston -- one with a remarkable and nationally significant history. From prairie to port to modern urban center, Buffalo Bayou links Houston's past and its present. It connects our city's diverse population to its heritage. The events that have played out along its banks from prehistoric times to today represent a legacy that begs to be told.

Along the banks of Buffalo Bayou there are a multitude of historic sites, early ethnic neighborhoods, and some of the city's oldest parks. By creating the Buffalo Bayou National Heritage Area, sites of historic, cultural, recreational and archaeological interest will be linked like a string of pearls. Moreover the Buffalo Bayou National Heritage Area will create an amenity that is vital to our city's "new economy," one that places a strong emphasis on natural, recreational and lifestyle opportunities.

Let me take you on a tour of Buffalo Bayou. It runs through the heart of downtown Houston. Here, we find Allen's Landing at the foot of Main Street. It was here in 1836 that Houston's founders, the Allen brothers stepped ashore and founded Houston. Allen's Landing became Houston's first port and a thriving commercial hub. Nearby, is Main Street/Market Square Historic District, a 48-block area with more than 50 structures on the National Register of Historic Places. Other nearby buildings and structures on the National Register -- Willow Street Pump Station, Waterworks Plant and Main Street Viaduct -- all tell a story of Houston's industrial past. While significant preservation has occurred along Buffalo Bayou, a National Heritage Area designation would strengthen local historic preservation efforts to recommend more structures to the National Register. According to the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance, more than 100 additional structures and sites would be eligible for listing on the Register. Through the National Heritage Area program, funds also would be available for the restoration and adaptive reuse of many structures into interpretive and visitor centers. These facilities will educate Houstonians and visitors about the city's industrial past.

Buffalo Bayou was called the "Highway of the Republic" during Texas' struggle for independence. The Battle of San Jacinto, fought at the confluence of Buffalo Bayou and the San Jacinto River, gained Texas' independence from Mexico and allowed colonization of the entire state. Moreover, it accelerated expansion of the western United States. Today, the San Jacinto State Historical Park, a National Historic Landmark, has more visitors than any other historical park in Texas.

Perhaps nothing shows Houston's entrepreneurial spirit and sheer bravado more than the man-made Houston Ship Channel, 50 miles inland from Galveston Bay. As humorist Will Rogers said in 1930, "Houston dared to dig a ditch and bring the world to its door." Located six miles east of downtown Houston on Buffalo Bayou, this port -- today the nation's #1 port in foreign shipping and #2 in tonnage-- is home to the country's largest concentration of oil refining and petrochemical production. In addition to shaping Houston's economy and securing the city's stature as one of the world's foremost international trading and energy centers, the Port opened up the state of Texas and much of the Gulf Coast to the world.

Although the Buffalo Bayou National Heritage Area would highlight important military leaders, oil wildcatters, and industrial titans, it would also provide the city with an invaluable opportunity to highlight the lives of early Mexican Americans and Afro-Americans who lived along the bayou, and worked in the early rail yards and at the Port of Houston. Historic ethnic neighborhoods can still be found today along Buffalo Bayou -- the Fourth and Sixth Wards, two National Register districts with strong collections of 19th century shotgun houses and Victorian cottages, for example. For a multi-cultural city whose ethnic population now exceeds its Anglo population, highlighting the lives of these ethnic groups will be an important and vital role of the proposed National Heritage Area.

While the historic and cultural resources of Buffalo Bayou are significant, Buffalo Bayou is first and foremost Houston's greatest natural resource. It is a mainstay of our region's little known ecological abundance. Eight distinct ecological zones surround the Houston area. Several segments of Buffalo Bayou have been designated part of the world-famous Great Coastal Texas Birding Trail. The waterway is home to the Katy Prairie, one of the region's most significant habitats for migratory waterfowl, shore birds, songbirds and hawks. More than 15 miles of hike and bike trails line Buffalo Bayou's banks and more than 20 additional miles are funded and planned. Houston's first public parks sprouted up along the banks of Buffalo Bayou in the late 19th century and today, the waterway is home to 10 City and County parks including Allen's Landing, Houston's birthplace and Sam Houston Park, the city's first public park that opened in 1899. Today, a 19th century collection of early Houston homes is displayed in this 20-acre downtown park.

The same resourcefulness and entrepreneurial spirit that created the Houston Ship Channel are alive along Buffalo Bayou's banks today. A National Heritage Area designation will strengthen and build upon the progress that already is underway, progress the Buffalo Bayou Partnership fosters and supports in tandem with other Houston groups dedicated to preserving this waterway.

The Buffalo Bayou Partnership was created in 1986 by the Mayor of Houston and Harris County Judge to act as an overseer authority for development along Buffalo Bayou. The 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization is a coalition of civic, environmental, governmental and business representatives. Our directors, who range from corporate and foundation heads to neighborhood residents, are approved by the Mayor and County Judge. We also have a strong ex-officio board, comprised of representatives from all levels of City and County government. Over the past five years, more than \$25 million in private and public funds have been raised or leveraged for Buffalo Bayou's redevelopment.

Specific accomplishments include:

- Opening of a 10-acre \$22 million waterfront park in the heart of downtown.
- Development of a master plan to unify more than \$25 million of existing and funded redevelopment projects at Allen's Landing Park, Houston's birthplace along Buffalo Bayou.
- Awarding of approximately \$10 million in federal Intermodal Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), and Transportation Enhancement funding for hike and bike trail development.
- Construction of Houston's first rail-to-trail project -- a \$1.6 million effort, funded through the ISTEA program.
- Coordination of a \$1 million master plan that is being led by an internationally recognized team of consultants. This planning study, which is now underway, has been funded jointly by the City of Houston, Harris County Flood Control District and Buffalo Bayou Partnership.
- Raising nearly \$4 million for land acquisition along Buffalo Bayou. Currently, 18 acres of property have been purchased or are under contract.
- Developing a \$100,000 interpretive master plan that calls for signage to be placed at more than 30 destinations along the Buffalo Bayou waterway. The Buffalo Bayou National Heritage Area would greatly assist us in implementing and promoting the interpretive system.

This progress has been achieved through a range of public-private initiatives and joint projects with a variety of non-profit and philanthropic institutions. Unlike many National Heritage Areas that create new management entities once designation is granted, we have an existing organization with a solid track record of achievement already in place.

Partnerships are key to the success of National Heritage Areas. We have the experience and the capacity to work cooperatively with a broad range of constituencies and stakeholders along the Buffalo Bayou corridor.

- We have partnered with the National Park Service's Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program for more than three years. Development of Houston's first rail-to-trail and creation of the Buffalo Bayou interpretive master plan are two projects that resulted from this partnership with the National Park Service. We know first hand the value of the technical assistance provided by this federal agency and know how to utilize its resources for the utmost effectiveness.
- We are partnering with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation on land acquisition along Buffalo Bayou. Another public land acquisition partner is the The Texas General Land Office.
- A partnership with the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department has provided the City of Houston and Buffalo Bayou Partnership with a \$500,000 grant for the redevelopment of Allen's Landing. These funds were leveraged with City of Houston and Harris County Flood Control District funds.

- The Texas Department of Transportation has been a valuable partner in our efforts to landscape freeway areas surrounding Buffalo Bayou.
- Highlighting the bayou's historic resources has been accomplished through a partnership with the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance. Together, the two organizations have sponsored an annual tour of historic bayou industrial buildings.
- In recent months, we have joined forces with 40 other civic groups and the Greater Houston Partnership, Houston's major business advocacy organization, to "change the face of Houston." This major quality of life initiative is focused on the enhancement of the city's parks and bayous, and removal of visual blight. This unique coalition of business and environmental groups has come together because all entities realize that quality of life is key to the economic health of the Houston region. Never before, has the business community of Houston been so involved in quality of life issues. A Buffalo Bayou National Heritage Area would play a significant role in The Quality of Life Coalition's agenda and would profit from the leadership and backing of Houston's strong business community

Many of our partners have provided letters in support of this testimony.

Another important opportunity that presents itself at this particular moment in time is the ability of the Buffalo Bayou National Heritage Area to provide enhanced green space as the City rebuilds after the devastation of recent Tropical Storm Allison. It caused more than \$5 billion in damage. to our city. We realize that federal funds cannot be used for land acquisition, but they can help us restore park land and develop a green infrastructure that will allow for flooding while providing open space and recreational opportunities. Funding is desperately needed to remedy the significant erosion that has taken place along Buffalo Bayou's banks as a result of the Allison Storm.

We urge you to support House Bill 1776 to allow the National Park Service to study the feasibility and suitability of the Buffalo Bayou National Heritage Area. This prestigious designation would provide us with the mechanism to preserve a nationally significant landscape, to create a new economic development and tourism tool for our city, to develop new partnerships, and to restore Buffalo Bayou to its rightful place in the hearts and minds of Houstonians, Texans, and all Americans.

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee for allowing me to come before you today in support of the Buffalo Bayou National Heritage Area. I would be pleased to answer any questions that you and your colleagues may have.

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